THE
Dark
Issue 2
PHANTOM TIDE

An Ovi Publication

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editorial

There is a specific kind of chill that has nothing to do with winter. It crawls up from the space between your shoulder blades, settles at the base of your skull and whispers... you are not alone. That is the chill we have chased for this second issue of Ovi Dark.

We told ourselves, as rational creatures of the modern age, that ghosts are echoes. That the creak in the hallway is just the house settling. That the figure in the peripheral vision is a trick of tired light. But then we read the reports. The real ones. The case files and maritime logs and abandoned diaries that refuse to fit into clean, logical boxes.

And we realized ...the horror was never a metaphor.

This issue descends, willingly and delightfully, into the Lovecraftian verse, not the tentacled gods of outer space but the older, more intimate dread. The geography of the human soul when it realizes

the walls are thin. We bring you stories like 'A Dangerous Descent', where the abyss is not a place but a habit. 'The Rope That Would Not Fall', where an execution becomes an eternity. And 'The Weight of Stillness', a quiet little nightmare about what happens when silence begins to breathe back.

But here is where Ovi Dark differs from a simple anthology of frights.

Between these fictions, you will find something stranger. Real-world reports. Paranormal incident files from the edges of recorded history. Witness statements that have been gathering dust in archives, presented alongside the speculative tales they inspired. We believe that the most profound horror is the friction point where fact rubs against fiction until both catch fire.

A ghost story is a promise. A real report is a wound. When you read them together, you can no longer pretend.

In this issue, we ask you to sit with the haunting. Do not turn on another light. Do not check your phone for comfort. Let the rope hang. Let the stillness press against your ears. Let the descent begin.

Because the spirits are not interested in your belief. They were never asking for permission.

Welcome to the dark. We have saved you a seat by the cold draft. ■

This issue, the 34th issue of the Ovi Thematic eMagazine and it is dedicated to the Indigenous Sovereignty, the Fourth World.
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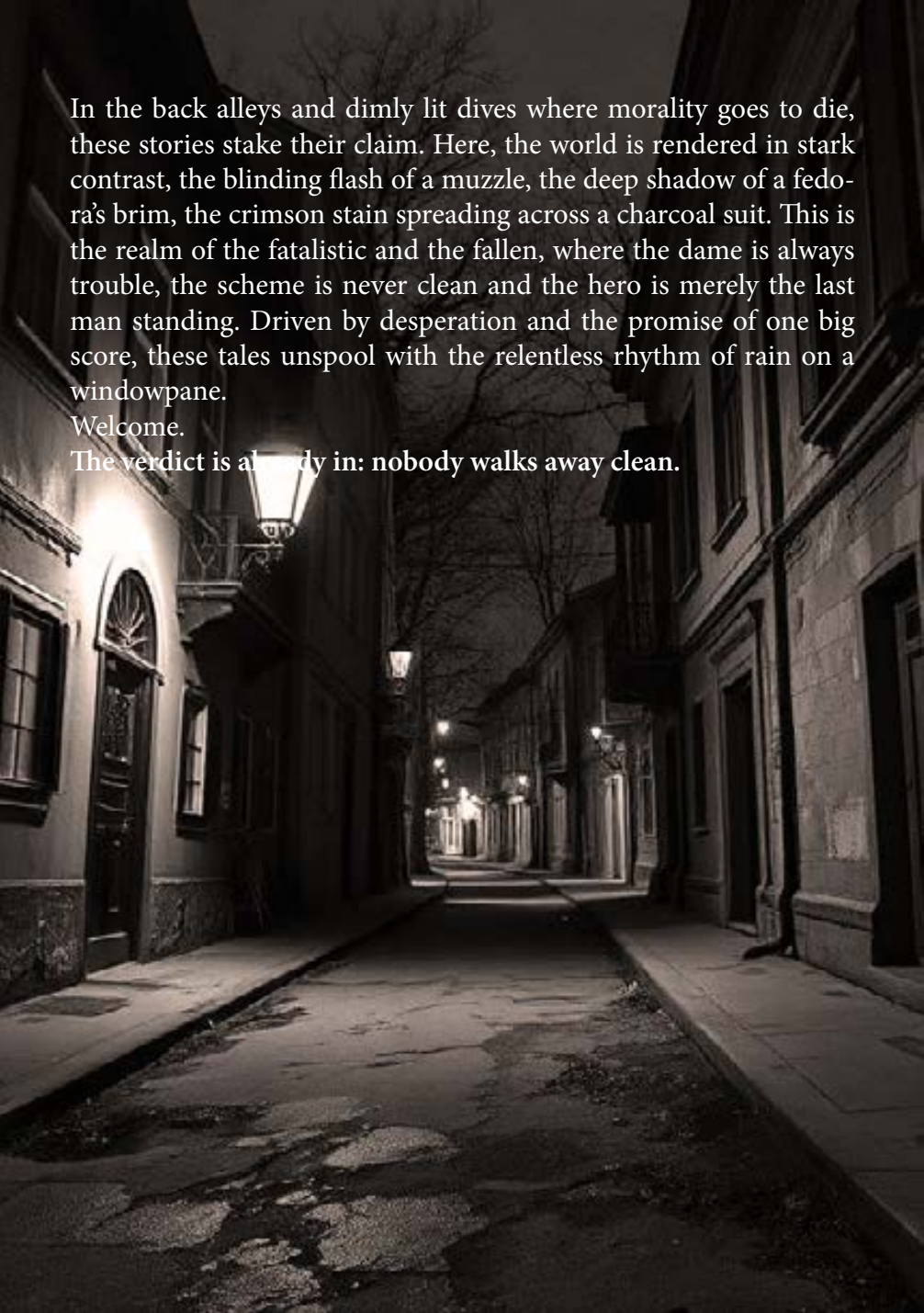
we cover every issue!

In the back alleys and dimly lit dives where morality goes to die, these stories stake their claim. Here, the world is rendered in stark contrast, the blinding flash of a muzzle, the deep shadow of a fedora's brim, the crimson stain spreading across a charcoal suit. This is the realm of the fatalistic and the fallen, where the dame is always trouble, the scheme is never clean and the hero is merely the last man standing. Driven by desperation and the promise of one big score, these tales unspool with the relentless rhythm of rain on a windowpane.

Welcome.

The verdict is already in: nobody walks away clean.



The Ovi Dark eMagazine

Pulp Fiction Short Stories
May 2026

Issue 02

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Pulp fiction literature refers to inexpensive magazines and novels, printed on cheap "pulp" paper, popular from the 1890s to the 1950s. These works featured sensational, fast-paced stories, hardboiled crime, sci-fi, horror, and romance, aimed at mass entertainment. Though dismissed as low art, pulp forged enduring archetypes (like the lone detective) and influenced film noir, comics, and writers like Raymond Chandler.

Ovi Thematic/Dark/ History eMagazines Publications 2026

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A Dangerous Descent

a tale gathered out of nightmares

By David Sparenberg

The moon was cut, the land was cold. The wanderer on the roads came to a place. It was a ruined place with nothing standing but broken stone upon ruined stone and ruined stone upon broken. There was a stairway going down, only no door to cover. And the poor man went in.

But there was no light whatsoever underground. The poor man had to foot the cold, black corridor with use of his hands along the walls, his eyes being useless.

By and by the traveler came to a room. It was a strange room too. No door was at the doorway, no furnishings were within. There was only a single bed. And the bed was atop a mound of fresh dug earth.

Now the wayfarer thought of resting, being weary to his bones. So he laid himself down upon the bed and drew the coverlets up to his chin. There was a smell of must and mold and the odor bothered the sleeper. Whether he slept or not cannot be said.

By and by there was a light, but only a gleam of light. It was a strange light, too, all gray and ghoulish green.

And the light showed pale as twilight and poverty down the corridor beyond the doorway without a door. There in the paleness was a dense shadow. And the shadow was that of a woman it seemed, tall of statue and menacing. There was an eeriness to her that sent a shiver. And the dreamer could tell the specter bode nothing good, as the figure came on toward him, petrified there like one buried alive in those rank sheets of that moldering bed. For the waif moved with a stalking motion but a will not its own. And she walked like a body bereft of her soul.

There and then when the man needed to cry out most desperately and challenge the menace, the shadow stopped and vanished. Whether that came from being seen too soon or not cannot be said. But it was a good thing. Because the traveler's voice was frozen inside. His tongue had the weight of lead. His chest was tighter with fear than the lid of a tightly sealed coffin.

But lo and behold, there was a new terror at hand! Scarce had the phantom disappeared from before the threshold when the turned dirt around the bed began to quake and give way. Up out from the trembling ground a haunting climbed, naked, ghastly, and breathless, with a green reek on her rotting skin. She pushed straight up with eyes rolled back and open maw, and toppled down, falling stiff as a plank and heavy as stone, hard onto the bed and the poor man prisoner upon it.

Then horror seized the dreamer to the depth of survival. With a strength that was all he could muster and desperate too, he struggled to be free from the crush of his corpselike assailant. He sat up in the unholy bed with his eyes bugging out, wet with a sweat from the scream he was screaming. The fallen stiff was gone. And the wanderer on the roads was alone in the underground room, with darkness only to behold before him.

After a heartbeat or a second

at most, the poor man again began footing his way down a cold, black corridor. His hands were his eyes while his eyes were strained to blindness against the impenetrable pitch. The black of the hallway was as dense as a tight wound shroud.

By and by the traveler saw a light in the distance. The light was a pale light too. It lead the sleepwalker down into yet another room. It was a strange room. Here there was nothing but a narrow bed set up inside the doorless doorway and the covers of the bed were turned back. More than this in the chamber, there was not a thing but only two. And the two women were disputing, although over what could not be said.

But at a stroke the two broke it off. One of the two was a genteel lady, tall of stature but as pale as a wasting sickness. The lady crossed over and laid herself out on the narrow cot, drawing the coverlets up to her chin. She lay flat on her back, with hands crossed atop her chest. Her eyes were fixed and motionless, staring at the ceiling above without even blinking.

The second of the two was of a different sort. Heavy boned and hard on the eyes, she was short and stout, with swart skin and a mole or two and a wiry whisker. She muttered viciously as she hastened from the room and disappeared.

The traveler went up beside the pale lady alone in her bed. Being weary himself with weariness close to death, the man wondered should he climb into the sheets as well, to give his flesh a bit of reviving rest. But first he asked the pale damsel, "What ails you lady, and why are you here in a state close to death?" Then it seemed the woman answered without a word spoken. Somehow the man knew there was a curse upon her and the one who had fled was the one casting the curse. The ire of the visitor rose at understanding this injustice. And he vowed in his heart and soul to deal with the witch and set the lady free.

Along and along, and he was again, eyeless and hand with foot, down a cold, black corridor. Then by and by there shown a light. And it was a weak light too, flickering ahead, like the light of a starving fire.

The traveler followed the light to its source. There he came to a place where one side of the stone of the hallway wall was hollowed into a cavern. In the shallow was a floor of sand like the waste of a desert. On the sand burned a ring of fire. Beside the fire sat an impish idol, as ugly as ugly could be. And there the fetish fed the fire, but poorly, with bits of twigs and the dry, brittle skeletons of broken and desiccated leaves.

To one side of her familiar, but turned away, sat a squat hag, the Baleful Gob, performing her foul work by muttering curses and spells of malediction. Her clumpy hands kept busy too and heavy breathing mixed with the sounds of bones being rubbed against bones and stones being pounded on stones.

When the idol at the fire spied the intruder looking in, that impish lump of evil scowled its worst scowl and howled its loudest howl. But the wanderer on the roads had a power and charm of his own. With a word he silenced the jabbering little demon. And there and then the fiend was frozen as quick as a chunk of ice in the grip of winter.

There followed next a battle the likes of which is seldom known. On one side pious prayers were intoned. On the opposing side countering curses were spewed. The battle went from fierce to fiercer then from fiercer to fiercest. Yet not once did the evil intention budge or flinch, turn away and scurry off.

At last, the dreamer summoned all the strength he could and desperate too. In a voice he might have borrowed from tempest, for it had the power of thunder to it, the man commanded the Gob be silent. He ordered her straight off to quit the place and lift her curse from the pale lady now and forever.

Then just when a body might think that goodness had victory in hand, a terrible reversal happened. The hair of the Baleful Gob was clumpy strands as thick as a hangman's rope. Here, in the work of perdition, several of the coils reared up and shot from her gorgon's massive head. With fearsome speed the thick coils flew too. In their flight the strands changed from hair into snakes. The braided serpent's jaws were open wide, and poison dripped from their exposed fangs.

On they flew at the gleeman's head and the reek of their hissing was licking his face. In fear of this nightmare death, he stumbled backward and fell away to save dear life. And falling away, the sleeper awoke.

Now here he was when his eyes opened, huddled beside a wintery bush, beneath a fruitless apple tree. Dew was on the roadman's skin and a chill was in his bones. The sky was like the shell of an egg, with sun barely breaking through. It was but the crack of dawn. From yellow-gray twilight the shadow of a raven passed over the land. The flapping of the raven's wings was a dread sound. In the near distance the traveler heard the pounding of hoof beats. The galloping was eerie and seemed to be that of a six-legged horse.

Then it was the traveler knew he had gone down into the NetherRealm. It was a dangerous descent too; death stalked him there. So, the wanderer with his restless, questing soul rose to his feet. He clutched the amulet at his throat, spoke a prayer-chant for protection, and turned his face westward. For there is one matter known by all initiates, and that truth is this: The shortest way through night is to walk east and the longest way through day is to walk west. Either way, there is dreaming. Only some dreams come from the haunting contortions of darkness and other dreams are gifts from the givers of light. ■

The rope that would not fall
By Regan O'Sullivan

The valley of St. Verena is a green cleft in the world, a place the maps have forgotten and the roads refuse to find. The modern village, if one can call a scatter of stone cottages and a single pub a village, huddles beside a stream that runs black with peat. Above it, on a knoll choked with elder and thorn, stands the church of St. Verena herself. Its tower is a square finger of grey limestone, pitted by six centuries of weather. The bell-frame is visible through the empty louvres... two great bells, their clappers frozen in a permanent yawn of rust.

So the guidebooks say. So the hikers believe.

I came to St. Verena in the October of last year, chasing a footnote in a monastic cartulary. The villagers were polite but distant, the sort of politeness that watches you from behind a lace curtain. Only old Mr. Thorne, the sexton, a retired schoolmaster with a face like a walnut—offered more than a nod.

"You'll hear them," he said, as we sat in the church porch. Rain ticked on the yew trees. "The bells. Not with your ears, perhaps. But you'll know."

"I understood they were rusted solid," I said.

Mr. Thorne smiled thinly. “Oh, they don’t move. Not the metal. But the sound, the sound comes. Always the same sequence. Slow. Measured. The old coup de la mort for the Requiem Mass. One stroke for each year of the dead, then nine for the soul’s release.”

He paused. A drip fell from the porch roof onto the stone.

“Last month, Mrs. Penrith heard it at three in the morning. She sat up in bed and told her husband, ‘That’s for me.’ She was dead by noon. Not a mark on her. Heart, the doctor said.” He tapped his own chest. “The bell knows, you see. It knows who is next.”

I asked, less sceptically than I wished, whether anyone had seen the ringer.

“Seen?” Mr. Thorne’s eyes moved to the tower door, iron-studded and immovable. “No. But on the night of a death, if you stand below the louvres, you can hear, not a rope. Something else. A breathing. A man’s breath, drawn in pain and let out as if each exhalation cost him the world.”

I should have left then. I did not.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The call came three days later.

I had been transcribing a fourteenth-century charter in the vicarage attic, a document that mentioned one "Hugo, son of Ranulf, bell-ringer of this parish." The margin bore a later hand, tremulous and cramped: Hic iacet qui fugit. Miserere. Here lies he who fled. Have mercy.

That night, I woke to a silence so complete it had texture. The rain had stopped. The stream had stopped. Even the air seemed to hold its breath.

Then the bell spoke.

It was not a vibration in the ear. It was a vibration in the room, in the marrow of my long bones. Low. Profound. A single note that faded into a second, then a third. The rhythm was funereal, deliberate, as if measured by a heart that had forgotten how to beat fast.

I dressed in darkness and went out.

The churchyard lay under a moon like a paring of bone. The tower rose black against the stars. And from the louvres, from the empty, rust-clotted louvres, came not only the sound of the bell but something else.

A rope.

It had not been there before. A thick, hemp rope, grey with age, dangling from the bell-chamber opening, its end frayed as if someone had sawed it with a blunt knife. Worse: it was moving. Not swinging in the wind, there was no wind but twitching. Jerking. As if an invisible hand were climbing it, hand over hand, from above.

I am not a man given to flights of fancy. I walked to the tower door. It should have been locked. It swung open on a darkness that exhaled cold air like a crypt.

Inside, the stair was a spiral of worn stone, each step slick with

something that was not water. I climbed. The rope passed me, a serpent of old fibres, descending from the upper dark. I did not touch it. I did not dare.

The bell-chamber was a square of moonlit dust. The two bells hung like great iron fruits, their surfaces a scab of orange rust. The rope vanished upward, through a hole in the ceiling, into the bell-frame itself, where no rope should have been attached.

And there was a man.

He knelt on the wooden platform beneath the larger bell. He wore a tunic of rough brown wool, rotted at the shoulders, and his feet were bare. His hair was long and matted, and his hands, his hands were wrapped in the rope, which passed through his palms as if they were made of smoke and memory. He was pulling. Heaving. Each pull produced no sound from the rusted bell above, yet the note filled the air, rich and mournful.

"Hugo," I said. My voice was a croak.

He turned.

His face was young, perhaps twenty but worn smooth by a grief that had lasted centuries. His eyes were the colour of the bell-metal, and they held no surprise. Only a terrible, familiar exhaustion.

"You hear it," he said. His lips moved, but the voice seemed to come from the walls. "You hear the knell. Who is it for this time? The baker's wife? The child with the cough?"

"I don't know," I said. "I came because ...because the rope."

He looked down at his hands. The rope passed through them, white and whole on one side, ghostly and translucent on the other. "I cannot let go," he whispered. "I tried once. In 1623. In 1798. In 1904. I take my hands away, and the rope is still there. It grows out of me."

"The cartulary said you fled."

His jaw tightened. "The plague came in the autumn of 1348. I was eighteen. The priest was dead. The villagers looked to me, the bell-ringer, the one who could summon help, who could ring the passing bell for the dying. I rang it for the first three. Then my mother took the fever. Her face turned the colour of the bells' clappers. I rang for her. And when she died, I ran."

The knell continued, stroke by stroke, as if another bell were counting.

"I ran down the valley," he said. "I thought: I will bring a physician from the next town. I will return with medicines. But I knew. I knew there was no physician. I knew the road was guarded by men with pikes who would thrust me back into the plague. So I hid.

For three days, I hid in a ditch, eating wild garlic, listening to the death knell I had abandoned. When I came back, the village was silent. Every door stood open. And the tower ...I climbed to the bells and I rang the Mass for the Dead for every soul I had left behind."

"Including yourself," I said.

He looked up. The moon through the louvre caught the tears that ran down his face but did not fall. "I was not dead. Not then. I stayed in this chamber. I refused to eat. I refused to drink. I pulled the rope until my hands bled. And when my body finally died, the rope did not. Because the bell had not finished."

"The bell has been ringing for six hundred years," I said slowly. "The villagers hear it before a death. They think it is a warning."

Hugo shook his head. "No. No warning. The bell is not for them." He pulled again, and the note that came was higher, a cry of unbearable longing. "It is for me. One stroke for each year I lived after I fled. Eighteen years of cowardice. Eighteen thousand six hundred and eighty-four strokes. And I have been counting. I have been pulling. But every time a villager dies, the bell adds another."

"Adds another?"

"Because I am still fleeing," he said. His voice cracked. "Every death in this valley that I could have prevented, every mother, every child, every old man alone in his bed, they are my plague. My punishment. I ring their knell, and the knell becomes mine. I cannot finish. I cannot atone. Because as long as one person in St. Verena fears death, I am still the boy who ran."

The rope jerked in his hands. The bell tolled again, louder, nearer, as if the sound were a physical thing pressing against my chest.

"You can stop," I said. I stepped forward. The dust on the floor did not move under my feet. "The atonement was never the bell. The atonement was staying. And you have stayed. Six hundred years. You never left again."

Hugo stared at me. For the first time, something like hope flickered in his rust-coloured eyes.

"Let go," I said. "The rope will fall. It must."

He looked down at his ghostly hands, at the rope that passed through them like a river through reeds. He closed his eyes. And with a sob that echoed through the centuries, he opened his fingers.

The rope dropped.

It did not fall slowly. It plummeted through the hole in the floor, through the stairwell,

through the tower door, into the night. We heard it hit the ground, a soft, final thump, like a body laid to rest.

The bell did not ring again.

Hugo's form wavered. The moonlight passed through his chest, his arms, his face. He was smiling, a young man's smile, unburdened. "The last one," he whispered. "Was that yours?"

I realised, then, that I had not breathed since the rope fell. My heart was a small, frightened thing in my ribs.

"No," I said. "I think it was yours."

He nodded. And like a candle pinched between finger and thumb, he went out.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The next morning, the church tower door was locked. The rope was gone. The bells were rusted solid, as they had always been. Mr. Thorne asked me, over tea, whether I had slept well.

"Perfectly," I said. "No bells at all."

He nodded, but his eyes lingered on my hands, which were still trembling.

I left St. Verena that afternoon. As the valley closed behind me, I heard something, not a bell, but the echo of a bell, faint as a thought, and a voice on the edge of hearing saying, Thank you.

I have not returned. But sometimes, in the quiet hours, I feel a rope brush my palm. And I wonder whether the dead ever truly let go. Or whether they simply pass the burden on to those who listen too closely.

Hic iacet qui fugit. Here lies he who fled.

But also, perhaps: Qui mansit, salvatus est. He who stayed, is saved. ■

Ghost sights reports

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, a wave of spiritualism swept across both Europe and America, leading to widespread newspaper reports of ghost sightings. Drawing from historical archives, here are five notable reports that capture the public fascination with the supernatural during this era.

1. The Headless Woman of Buckingham (1898)

In January 1898, the *Illustrated Police News* reported that a farmer and his companion encountered a "headless woman" while driving a horse and trap near an isolated crossroads outside Buckingham, England .

The night was dark and well-advanced when the farmer saw a black object blocking the path. As he approached, his horse began to tremble violently. When he called out to the figure, there was no response. The figure would vanish and reappear, only drifting away when called upon in the name of God. The report noted that many others subsequently claimed to have seen the wraith, and the spot had become "less frequented of late" .

2. The Scientific Investigation at Ballechin House (1897)

Unlike typical folk tales, the case of Ballechin House in Perthshire, Scotland, was a formal investigation. In 1897, the Marquess of Bute leased the allegedly haunted house to members of the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.) to document phenomena systematically .

The team, including Ada Goodrich Freer, kept journals recording nearly 100 distinct "audible phenomena," ranging from shrieks and groans to sounds of "monotonous reading." However, the investigation ended in scandal. A *Times* article accused the researchers of incompetence, suggesting the noises were simply plumbing or trickery. As a result, the S.P.R. disowned Freer and refused to publish the findings in their proceedings .

3. The Phantom Ship of the North Platte (1862, 1888 & 1903)

One of the most dramatic legends from the American West involves a ghostly sailing ship that appeared on the North Platte River in Wyoming. According to stories published in *Fate* magazine (1948), the ship was seen on three specific occasions, and each sighting allegedly heralded a death .

- **The Trapper (1862):** A scout named Leon Webber reportedly saw the ship emerge from the fog. On the deck lay the corpse of a girl, whom he recognised as his betrothed. He later learned she had died at that exact moment.

- **The Rancher (1888):** Gene Wilson saw the icy vessel and recognised the burned body of his wife, only to rush home and find his house burned down.

- **The Witness (1903):** Victor Heibe saw a man hanging from a gallows on the ship and recognised his friend, Tom Horn, who was being hanged in Cheyenne that very day.

Historians are highly sceptical of this tale. The "Cheyenne Bureau of Psychological Research," which supposedly recorded the accounts, never existed, and the author, Victor Gaddis, was a pulp fiction writer who later coined the term "Bermuda Triangle" .

4. The "Ghost Exorcism" Riot at Hackney Churchyard (1895)

Ghost sightings in the Victorian era did not just frighten individuals; they could incite mobs. In August 1895, a panic in Hackney, London, led to a full-blown riot. For some time, people passing the parish church of St. John had reported seeing a ghost, causing women to faint .

The situation culminated when a crowd of over 1,000 people gathered with lanterns, sticks, and stones to hunt the spectre. Claiming the ghost rose from a grave where "three boys playing cards" had supposedly been struck by lightning, the mob climbed over railings and trampled tombstones. Police had to be requisitioned to clear the burial ground, though the ghost was never caught (suggesting it may have been a hoax by locals) .

5. The "Spectral Lodgers" of 131 West 14th Street (1881)

The spirit photography craze fuelled ghost reports in major cities like New York. In 1881, *The New York Times* reported on "Two Spectral Lodgers" at 131 West 14th Street, an incident indicative of the era's obsession with spiritualism .

The report was part of a collection of "Local Ghosts" published during a time when séances and psychical research were at their peak. Reporters noted that spiritualism had become a way for Victorians to reconcile religious beliefs with the rapid advances of science. The sightings at this address were taken seriously enough to be published as a notable haunting in the city .

The Context of the 19th-Century Sightings

These reports did not occur in a vacuum. The 19th century was the golden age of **Spiritualism,** a religious movement based on the belief that the dead could communicate with the living. The rise of photography introduced "spirit photography" (often frauds using double exposure), and newspapers found that ghost stories sold copies .

Interestingly, while these accounts terrified readers of the time, modern investigators note that many sightings had natural causes. For instance, the famous **Brown Mountain Lights** in North Carolina, which caused a sensation in the early 20th century, were officially explained by the U.S. Geological Survey in 1922 as simply the headlights of trains and automobile lamps. ■

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The 13th figure
By Aimee Ingram

The woodblock felt like a dead man's skin. Katsuo knew this because he had held his wife's hand after the red rash took her. The same cold grain. The same refusal to warm under his palm.

"You'll finish by dawn," said Lord Sugiwara's man, whose name Katsuo never learned, only the smell of burned oil and authority. The man stood in the doorway of the subterranean print shop, where the air was thick with fermented persimmon juice and the ghosts of old inks. "Three hundred sheets. The shogun's army crossing the bridge at sunrise. Victory."

Katsuo bowed. His spine had forgotten how to unbend. "Yes, my lord."

He was not a lord. Sugiwara was a vulture who had defeated Katsuo's patron in a skirmish no one would sing about. And Katsuo, once the finest hannya printer in Miyako, now carved lies. Every stroke of his burin was a small betrayal. The general's armour too polished. The enemy's flags already in mud. He mixed his blacks from soot and rice glue, but at night, alone, he added something else.

Ashes.

He had saved them from the cremation grounds. Three fingers of fine grey dust. His wife's sister. The bamboo cutter's twins. The old priest who had taught him to read wood grain like a fortune. Katsuo kept them in a ceramic jar painted with wisteria. When no one watched, he stirred a pinch into his ink stone.

Not for spite. For memory.

"The dead should not be forgotten," he whispered to the blank shina block. "Even in a liar's print."

The commission was a battle scene. A thousand spears. A red sun low on the horizon. But Katsuo carved something else into the seventh layer, the hidden ply, invisible to the pressman who would never know. He carved a ghost story: a woman with no mouth, walking through the crowd of soldiers. In the print's first state, she stood at the back. A tiny figure. A mistake, if anyone noticed. They never did.

On the night of his execution, for the secret print was found, as secrets always are, Katsuo laughed. The sword was cold. Lord Sugiwara watched from his palanquin, picking tea leaves from his teeth.

"You think you've won," Katsuo said.

Sugiwara tilted his head. "You're already bleeding."

"No." Katsuo touched the woodblock they had confiscated, leaning against the execution post like a child. "The ink remembers."

* * * * * * * * * *

The first owner was a merchant named Hattori, who bought the battle print for its pretty red sun. He hung it in his counting house, where it watched him tally rice futures. On the third day, his daughter pointed.

"Father. That woman in the back. She wasn't there yesterday."

Hattori squinted. A small figure in grey. No mouth. Her kimono the same shade as the background fog. He had not noticed her before. But prints did not change. He was tired. He told his daughter to stop inventing ghosts.

On the seventh day, the figure was closer. One step. Her empty face now visible between two spearmen's shoulders.

Hattori burned the print.

The smoke smelled of cremation grounds. He coughed for three weeks.

The prints spread. They always do. Sugiwara had commissioned three hundred, and they entered the world like seeds: a gift to allies, a sale to dealers, a crumpled sheet lining a fishmonger's basket. Each one carried the 13th figure. Each owner, in their own time, noticed her moving.

In Edo, a blind lute priest felt her with his fingers. "She is stepping forward," he told his apprentice. "One brush-stroke per week. She will reach the frame in eleven moons."

In Osaka, a courtesan dreamed of grey ash falling from her ceiling. She woke to find the print's figure now pressing against the edge of the paper, as if pushing from within.

In Nagasaki, a Dutch trader used his magnifying lens. He screamed. The figure had no mouth, but her eyes were wet.

* * * * * * * * * *

The scholar Rin Suzuki was not a believer. She was a reclusive ukiyo-e restorer with a bad back and a worse temper, and she lived in a single room above a pickle shop. When a dying merchant's widow brought her the eleventh known copy, folded in silk, wrapped in prayer strips, Rin sighed.

"It's just a print," she said. "Wood grain. Ink. Paper mulberry."

The widow's hands shook. "My husband locked it in a

chest. When we opened it last week, the woman had crossed the border of the scene. Her toe touched the margin."

Rin put on her brass spectacles. She had restored three thousand prints. She had seen foxes painted as women, demons hidden in clouds, and one particularly lewd eggplant. But she had never seen a figure that changed position.

She laid the print on her light table.

Battle scene. Red sun. Spears. And there ...yes, a woman in grey, her foot just extending past the battle's edge, as if she were about to step off the paper onto the wooden table.

Rin touched the ink with her fingertip.

It was warm.

"No," she whispered.

She scraped a single grain of black pigment into a ceramic dish. Under her handheld lens, it did not look like soot from pine or lamp. It looked like bone. Porous. Calcined at low heat. The kind of ash that still holds the shape of what it used to be.

Her heart became a fist.

She remembered her grandmother's stories from the Great Kan'ei Famine. The pits. The mass cremations. The monks who said the dead did not leave, they simply changed form. Ash is a memory. Ink is a carrier.

Rin had a friend at the Zōjōji temple. A young priest named Kenji who owed her for restoring their temple's Amida painting. She wrapped the print in wax cloth and walked through the rain, her bad knee clicking on every stone.

Kenji unrolled the print in the candlelit scriptorium. He did not speak for a long time.

"This is not a haunting," he said finally. "This is a birth."

"Explain."

He pointed to the figure. In the two hours since Rin had last

looked, the woman's toe had curled downward. Not a step. A grip. She was clutching the edge of the two-dimensional world.

"The spirit is using the ink as a bridge," Kenji said. "Each brushstroke is a limb. Each new copy is a door. She has been walking for months. When she reaches the viewer's space..."

"She crawls out."

"She arrives."

Rin thought of Katsuo, the executed printer. She had studied his known works. He had been a master of bokashi, the gradient technique that makes ink bleed from dark to light. He understood that ink is not a dead thing. It flows. It breathes. It remembers the temperature of the hand that mixed it.

"We have to destroy every copy," Rin said.

Kenji shook his head. "The original woodblock still exists. Lord Sugiwara kept it as a trophy. As long as the block remains, a new print can be made. The ghost is not in the paper. She is in the cut. In the furrow of the burin. In the soot that was once human lungs."

* * * * * * * * * *

That night, Rin broke into Sugiwara's storehouse.

It was a fool's errand. She had no sword, no ninja skills, only a crowbar and a lantern and the desperate logic of a woman who had spent forty years removing foxing stains from paper. The guards were drunk. The lock was old. The storehouse smelled of camphor and forgotten power.

The woodblock sat on a pedestal, wrapped in black silk. She unwrapped it.

Her lantern illuminated the carved surface. The battle scene. The thousand spears. And there, in the seventh layer, the hidden ply, the ghost woman, perfectly preserved. But the wood had changed. The grain around her figure was no longer static. It

rippled, like water in a slow current.

Rin touched the carving.

The wood was warm.

The figure blinked.

Not on the print. On the block. Her eyes opened, two dark pits in the shina and for one terrible second, Rin saw the face of someone who had died of the plague. Cheekbones like knives. A throat swollen shut. And gratitude. Terrible, aching gratitude.

Thank you, the wood seemed to say. I was forgotten. Now I remember how to move.

Rin screamed.

She did not scream loudly. It was a small, choked sound, the way a nun might scream inside a prayer. But it was enough. The guards stirred outside. She had minutes.

She raised the crowbar.

"I am sorry," she told the block. "You deserve to rest. But you cannot cross."

She brought the crowbar down on the carving's face.

The wood splintered. A sound like a rib cracking. And something else, a sigh, or a wind, or a thousand voices exhaling at once. The lantern flickered. The block split in two, and from the split came a fine grey ash, dusting Rin's hands, her apron, her spectacles.

She did not wipe it away.

The guards found her kneeling in the ash, weeping. They dragged her to the magistrate, who sentenced her to five years for theft and vandalism. She did not defend herself. When they asked why she had destroyed a priceless artefact, she said only: "The dead should not be made to walk."

* * * * * * * * * *

The prints that remained, eleven copies, scattered across Japan, did not change after that

night. The 13th figure stayed where she was: one toe over the margin, her empty face turned toward the viewer, forever mid-step. Collectors call her "Katsuo's Ghost." Scholars argue about whether she is a printing error or a deliberate signature.

Rin Suzuki knows the truth.

When she finished her sentence, she returned to her room above the pickle shop. She hung a single blank sheet of paper on her wall. White. Unmarked. Every morning, she touches it with her palm.

It is always cold.

But sometimes, just sometimes, she feels a faint pulse, like a heartbeat trapped between fibres, and she whispers to the wall: "Stay there. You are ink now. Ink does not hunger."

And the paper trembles.

But it does not answer. ■

The log of unkept hours
By Thanos

It is not madness that haunts the Pendant Crag Lighthouse, though madness would be kinder.

I came to the rock in the autumn of ’67, a man already half-drowned in grief, seeking the solitary wage of the keeper’s life. The storm-torn coast of Cornwall knows my name, John Thorne, widowed, childless, and thus deemed expendable by the Trinity House commissioners. They gave me forty-eight hours of instruction, a keg of rum for the winter, and the warning they give all new men... The previous keeper departed suddenly. He did not leave a reason.

The lantern room smells of brine and something older. On my first night, I found the logbook open to a page not written by any hand I recognised. The ink was black, but the strokes had a peculiar wetness, as though freshly wept. It read:

September 12, 1869. The barque Elizabeth Mary will founder on the eastern reef at 2:47 AM. Four souls lost: Michael O’Doul, carpenter; Esther Vane, passenger; twins Robert and Margaret Hix.

I laughed then. Drunk on the wind and the terrible loneliness, I laughed. The date was three weeks hence. I closed the log, called it a jest left by some prankish relief keeper, and climbed to tend the lamp.

On September 12th, the storm came not from the west but from the north, a direction the old fishermen said storms never took. At 2:47 AM, I heard the splintering of oak over the shriek of the gale. By dawn, the coastguard had found the wreckage. Four bodies. The names matched the log.

I do not sleep now. Not properly.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The ghost does not manifest as a shape or a voice. He is a pressure behind the eyes, a sensation of cold metal pressed to the temple. He writes when the fog is thick and the lamp throws shadows that move against the wind. I have learned to keep fresh pens and a new bottle of iron-gall ink on the desk, else he uses his own nail and his own blood, the page will rustle, and there, in a dark that is not red but older, the names appear.

And they are never wrong.

October 3rd. The ketch Mary Rose. Captain Silas Webb will die of heart failure in the pilot house at 11:12 PM. His son Thomas will survive, only to drown in the same berth twenty-two years hence.

November 17th. A false entry. A curl of smoke from a farmhouse chimney in St. Just. The occupant's name: Laura Penrose. She will choke on a fishbone at supper. Do not try to warn her. She does not exist yet.

That was the first time the ghost wrote of the not-yet. I spent a week in a stupor, rowing to the mainland to search parish records, only to find no Penrose by that name in any generation. I returned to the lighthouse, and the log had a new line, scratched deep into the oak of the desk itself:

Causality is not a line. It is a knot.

I stopped trying to understand. I simply recorded. By Christmas of ’67, I had filled three volumes with the ghost’s hand. He does not predict weather. He predicts consequences, the chain of a dropped stitch, a forgotten letter, a mating of bloodlines that will bear a child destined to walk into the sea seventy years later. He sees the end of every thread and weeps it onto the page.

I began to think of him not as a haunting but as a function. A trapped probability engine, as the ghost of the old keeper, for it is surely him, once wrote in the margins of his own mathematics: I am not a prophet. I am an integral. I have become the place where the future passes through the past.

On the night of April 3rd, 1868, he wrote a single word.

The lamp was burning low. A squall had turned the sea to beaten lead. I sat at the desk with my own journal, trying to remem-

ber my wife's face, when the pen lifted itself from the brass holder. The nib hovered. Then it descended, not with the furious scratch of prediction but with a terrible gentleness.

It wrote: Lydia.

My hand went cold. My breath stopped.

Lydia was the name my wife had chosen, whispered once in a fever before the consumption took her. If we had had a daughter. If God had been kind. I had never spoken it aloud. Not to any living soul.

The ghost wrote beneath it, in the same patient hand:

Daughter of John Thorne and Mary Thorne (née Beckett). Conceived October 12th, 1866. Died in the womb, March 2nd, 1867. You did not know. She was too small to quicken.

I did not weep. That would have been a relief. Instead, I felt the slow unspooling of every thread I had believed held me together. The ghost had reached into the closed drawer of my history and pulled out a never-was. Not a prediction. An accounting.

I reached for the pen to write my own reply. But the ghost was not finished.

The nib scratched again. Faster now. Desperate.

Lydia Thorne...

Then a stop. The pen trembled. I watched as the ghost hesitated, a thing I had never seen him do. The ink beaded, fell, blotted.

He crossed out the name. One violent horizontal slash.

Underneath, in letters that grew smaller and more frantic as they proceeded:

TOO LATE.

* * * * * * * * * *

I sat in the dark until dawn.

The sea threw itself against the rock. The lamp's mechanism clicked and sighed. And I understood, with the clarity of a man already dead, what the ghost had finally shown me.

He does not predict the future. He calculates it, every cause, every effect, every child born of a night's desperation and every grave dug by a decade of silence. He saw the thread of my unborn daughter, stretched from October 1866 to a point I could not then have seen. He saw her life. Not in the womb. After.

Because the ghost wrote Lydia, not as a memory, but as a future. A daughter who had died before drawing breath, yet the ghost named her in the present tense. He wrote TOO LATE not because she was already dead, but because I was.

Let me write this plainly, though my hand shakes.

The probability engine does not see what will be. It sees what must be chosen. Every entry, every shipwreck, every unborn child, these are not destinies. They are branch points. The ghost writes the name of the victim to alert the world: Here is a knot. Cut it differently, and the thread falls elsewhere.

But no one ever cuts it differently, because the logbook is a curse of solitaire. Only the keeper reads it. And the keeper is always a man who has lost everything, sent to a rock where no one will believe him, given a pen and a lamp and the slow erosion of time.

I was never meant to warn anyone.

I was meant to read my own name.

That was the ghost's true purpose, and tonight I understand why he scratched out Lydia. Because the moment he wrote her name, my daughter, born alive in an alternate winding of the knot—he saw that I would never meet her. Not because she died in the womb. Because I die here, tonight, before I can return to the mainland and find the wom-

an who would have been her mother.

Not Mary. Mary is dead.

Another woman. One I have not yet met. One I would have met if I had left the lighthouse last autumn, if the storm had not kept me, if the ghost had not kept my attention fixed on the dead instead of the living.

The ghost is not a prophet.

He is a warning system that has run out of time.

And he just wrote TOO LATE because the branch point where I father Lydia closes in one hour. In one hour, the supply schooner will anchor in the cove, a day early, driven by a gale I did not predict and aboard will be a young widow from Penzance named Alice Trelawny. She will bring fresh oil and a letter from the Commissioner. She will be kind. She will stay for supper because the sea will be too rough to return.

And if I am alive at midnight, we will speak. And the thread of Lydia will spin itself from that single conversation.

But I will not be alive at midnight.

Because the ghost has shown me the other entry, the one he wrote three hours ago while I slept. I found it just now, on the final page of the log:

John Thorne. Struck by the counterweight chain of the lantern mechanism, 11:47 PM, April 3rd, 1868. He will reach to clean a lens the ghost has fogged with its own breath. The chain will snap. His neck will break.

Cause of fog: the ghost itself. Method of suicide: infinite recursion.

Do not mourn him. He was always going to read his own name.

Below that, in a hand so small I needed the glass to read it, the ghost added a final line. Not a prediction. A confession.

I am the knot that remembered how to cut.

* * * * * * * * * *

The lamp is turning. The fog is rising. I hear the schooner's bell through the wall of the sea.

And I have a choice.

I can tend the light, as I have sworn to do, as my contract binds me, as every keeper before me has done into madness or death. I can climb the spiral stairs, wipe the lens, and feel the ghost's cold breath on my neck as the chain falls.

Or I can run down to the cove, meet the widow Trelawny before the ghost's hour strikes, and live a life I was never supposed to have.

But the ghost is not a prophet. He is a probability engine. And he has already calculated both outcomes.

In one, Lydia is born. She becomes a mathematician. She solves the problem of the Pendant Crag Lighthouse a hun-

dred years from now, exorcising the engine by proving that causality is an illusion. She lives to be ninety. She never knows her father's name.

In the other, I survive. I marry Alice. We have a son. He becomes a fisherman. He drowns in the same berth as Thomas Webb, the son of the captain of the Mary Rose. The knot tightens. The ghost writes forever.

The ghost scratched out not Lydia's name, but his own hope. TOO LATE was not for me. It was for him.

He wanted to stop writing.

I am halfway up the tower stairs now. The chain clinks overhead. The ghost's breath is on my neck, and I realise, with a laugh that tastes of salt and iron that I have already made my choice.

Not the son. Not the daughter.

The log.

I will let the chain fall. I will let the ghost be free of his arithmetic. I will let the widow Trelawny arrive to find a cold lamp and a dead keeper and a logbook with one final entry, written in my own hand before the fog took my reason:

Dear Alice,

The name is not cursed. The lighthouse is not haunted. The world is simply a calculation that forgot to stop. If you want a child, find a man who has never read a future. Love him blindly. That is the only way to break the knot.

I have loved you already, in a thread that never was.

Burn this book.

E.

The chain falls.

The lamp goes out.

And in the darkness, for the first time in forty years, the Pendant Crag Lighthouse is silent. No scratch of pen. No whisper of ink. Only the sea, and the schooner's bell, and a young

widow rowing toward a light that no longer burns.

She will find the logbook open to the final page.

She will read my name.

And because she is kind, she will not burn it.

She will write her own name beneath mine, in the fresh bottle of iron-gall ink, and wait for the ghost to reply.

He will not.

But the pen will lift itself, just once, and write:

Thank you.

Then nothing. Ever again.

Some chains break.

Some knots, once cut, stay cut.

And somewhere in the great dark arithmetic of the universe, a daughter who was never born closes her ledger and smiles. ■

VÄXJÖ VANISHING
THANOS KALAMIDAS
Växjö Vanishing
by Thanos Kalamidas
A case appears in Växjö making Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson suspect that the cases - one from 1980s - are connected
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The unswung hammer

It is not the hour for men. Three-seventeen in the morning holds no breath of daylight, no promise of rescue. At the Ford Motor Company's Highland Park plant, the furnace-reek of hot metal and the ghost-sweet of cutting oil hang in the vaulted dark like a held sob. Line #4 stands frozen, a black iron serpent of half-joined chassis, rivet buckets cold, the great overhead belt slack as a hanged man's rope.

But listen.

Tat-tat-tat-tat. Hiss.

A single rivet gun, number seven, Station Twelve, shudders to life on its spring balancer. No hand guides it. No wrist steadies its barrel. Yet it swings left, bites into a fresh steel lap joint, and spits a rivet free. The torn shank clatters to the concrete. The gun jerks right tat-tat-tat another rivet dropping. Then another. It works backward along the chassis frame, un-building what living hands had fastened nine hours prior.

This is the work of Walter Czekaj, thirty-one years of age, late of Hamtramck, late of the Polish Legion, late of this world since the second Tuesday of November, 1918.

His hand, the left one, had been a good hand. Strong. Scarred across the knuckles from a boyhood fight with a threshing belt. He used to say his left hand knew a rivet's head before his eyes had found it. On that last afternoon, the belt lurched. A mis-fed steel panel slipped. His hand slid with it, under the descending ram of the pneumatic press. Not a cut. Not a break. A crush. The kind that turns flesh to purple jam inside the glove. He did not scream. He looked down at the hand, then at the foreman and said only "The oil is dirty."

It was. The cutting oil in the sump had carried filings and floor-slop for weeks. Infection climbed his arm like a dark vine. By the third morning, his elbow was the colour of a thundercloud. By the fifth, his armpit. He died at 3:17 AM in a cot behind the clinic, the night nurse holding a basin of water that had already turned rusty.

Now his ghost does not wail. It does not rattle chains or flicker the arc lamps. It simply returns to the one rivet that killed him, the one he had been reaching for when the panel slipped. He had dropped it, you see. A single half-inch rivet, hot from the forge bucket, rolled off his glove and under his heel. He bent to pick it up. That was the error. That put his hand in the press's path.

So each night, Walter Czekaj, dead and diligent, operates the rivet gun with no hand at all. He removes every rivet he drove on that last shift, one by one, in reverse order, hunting for the one that fell. He will find it, he thinks, and set it right. He will put it back into its correct hole, hammer it true, and then ...what? He does not know. Perhaps time rewinds. Perhaps he wakes in his own bed with two good hands. Perhaps his wife stops crying into the kitchen flour sack.

But dawn always comes. At first light, the chassis on Line #4 is whole again, every rivet back in place, including the one that killed him. The factory floor shows no sign of the night's

work. No oil smear. No dropped shanks. The rivet gun hangs inert, its bit cool.

* * * * * * * * * *

One night, the nineteenth of December, 1918, a night watchman named Ellis T. Meeks makes his rounds. He is sixty-two, a former railroad brakeman with a left ear torn off by a coupling pin. He does not believe in spirits. He believes in drafts, faulty wiring, and the slow theft of brass fittings by night-shift cleaners.

He hears the tat-tat-tat at 3:16.

He walks toward it. His flashlight beam cuts the dark like a knife through tallow. The beam finds the rivet gun, swinging, hammering, backing out steel fasteners in a rhythm as steady as a heartbeat.

"Who's there?" says Meeks. His voice cracks.

The gun stops. Hovers. Then slowly turns toward him.

Meeks does not run. He has seen a man's head taken off by a snapped cable. He has held a dying fireman in his lap while the train burned. He steps closer.

The gun's trigger guard is empty. No finger. No hand. No arm. Yet he feels a presence, a thickness in the cold air and a smell, cutting oil, carbolic soap, and the faint sweet-rot of gangrene.

"Walter," says Meeks. He does not know why he says that name. But it tastes right on his tongue.

The gun lowers an inch.

"You won't find it that way," Meeks whispers. "The rivet you dropped. It's not in the frame. It's not in any joint you made."

The gun trembles on its spring.

Meeks kneels, slowly, for his knees are bad and points his light under the chassis. "The press ram knocked it sideways. That night. It rolled clear to the wall. Fell into the floor drain. It's

still there. A foot of rusted pipe and twenty years of grease, but it's there."

A long silence. The arc lamps above flicker once, twice.

Then the rivet gun clicks, softly, almost gently and drops from the spring balancer. It hits the floor with a dead ring. No more movement.

Meeks leans against a tool chest and waits. The clock on the wall ticks to 3:17. At that exact moment, a sound comes from the drain grate near the wall, a small, distinct clink, metal on metal, then the soft roll of a single rivet coming to rest.

Walter Czekaj does not appear. There is no light, no shape, no whisper. But Meeks feels a pressure lift from the air, like a hand unclenching after thirty years.

He walks to the drain, bends, and picks up a rust-crusted half-inch rivet. It is warm.

He does not put it back. He does not hammer it into any joint. He carries it to the furnace door, opens the iron hatch, and tosses it into the coal fire. It glows orange, then white, then falls apart into cinder.

* * * * * * * * * *

At dawn, the shift foreman finds Meeks asleep on a pile of burlap sacks near Line #4. The rivet gun is on the floor where it fell. The foreman picks it up, hangs it on its spring, and tests it. It works fine. He builds a chassis all morning without a single misfire.

No one speaks of 3:17 again.

But the night watchman, when asked why he smiles at the furnace, touches his torn ear and says nothing.

Walter Czekaj's widow buries a crucifix in the factory yard that spring. The next morning, the ground is undisturbed but a single white dandelion has opened exactly where the hot rivet fell into the drain.

The assembly line runs on. It always runs on.

Only the dead know how to truly stop. ■

His future existence
depends on your
present presence.

The Rigid Sky

She came with the silver, not the fire.

Not for her the blackened earth of Lakehurst, the groaning wreckage, the stench of roasting meat and melted duralumin. She had been Else Vogel, twenty-two years old, stewardess on the *Hindenburg*, and she had died not in flame but in the act of throwing a child, a small, terrified boy named Karl, through a falling gallery window into the arms of a sailor on the mooring line. The gas cell above her had burst a heartbeat later, and the heat had been so fast that she felt nothing but a brief, astonished clarity: *So this is how light leaves.*

What bound her was not the place. The place was ashes and a field in New Jersey. What bound her was the *shape*—the great leviathan cigar, the walking decks inside a whale, the hush of engines and the creak of girders. She became a ghost of rigid airships themselves. Whenever a child glued together a scale model from balsa and tissue paper, a faint shimmer would appear above the dorsal fin, no larger than a candle's breath, and it would wave. Whenever a film projector rattled and a zeppelin crossed the screen *Hell's Angels*, say, or that newsreel of the *Graf* over Rio, she would

flicker in the emulsion for a single frame, a woman in a dark blue dress, hand raised.

She did not speak. She had no voice. Only gesture, only the silver.

Years passed. Decades. Ships of rigid form vanished from the sky, and the ghost grew fainter, a habit without a home. Until the simulation.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The VR designer's name was Mira Takahashi, and she did not believe in ghosts. She believed in polygons, shaders, volumetric fog, and the unbearable fidelity of loss. Her project, *Zeppelin: 1937* was not a game. It was a digital tomb. Every rivet, every linen panel, every bulkhead of the *Hindenburg* had been recreated from microfilm and wreckage schematics. She had even modelled the hydrogen cells, blue-grey and sick with the gas, sixteen massive silken bags that shifted with the ship's pitch. The final flight. The last hour.

"You're insane," her colleague Jen said, watching Mira adjust the pressure values in Cell 4. "You're actually putting in the leak."

"The National Transportation Safety Board's 1938 report," Mira replied softly, "suggested a spark from a static discharge near Cell 4. I'm not recreating the fire. I'm recreating the *condition*. A slow seep. The crew wouldn't have known. Not until it was over."

She pressed *compile*. The simulation breathed to life inside her goggles: a silver corridor, the windows slanted with evening light over New Jersey, the faint vibration of the four Daimler-Benz diesels. She had programmed passengers, digital phantoms in linen suits and flowered hats. They laughed, they drank Sekt, they did not know.

Mira stepped inside. It was her seventy-third test run. The ship was at 650 feet, descending towards Lakehurst. The air

smelt of nothing, because VR had no smell, but Mira had added a low-frequency hum she found calming.

She saw the shimmer above the dorsal fin by the tail elevator. It was not in the code.

She froze. The shimmer was silver, not pixelated, not a reflection artefact. It was a soft, persistent glow, and inside it, no, *attached to it* like a moth to a lamp was a woman. Dark blue dress. Hair pinned in a 1930s roll. Her face young and tired and terribly serious. She was looking directly at Mira.

"You're not a polygon," Mira whispered. Her throat closed.

The woman did not answer. She turned slowly, as if moving through honey and walked *through* the digital bulkhead. Mira followed, stumbling, her real legs knocking against a real desk somewhere in her Brooklyn studio. The simulation kept her. The silver woman led her down the keel walkway, past the electrical room, past the water tanks, to the stern. The silver gathered, thickened, and became a single pointing arm.

The finger aimed at Cell 4.

Mira pulled off her goggles. The room was dark. The monitor showed the simulation idling, nothing unusual. But she had seen. She loaded the telemetry log for the run. At the moment she had been watching, the simulation had recorded an anomalous point light, no known source and a slight pressure fluctuation in Cell 4's digital hydrogen. The leak she had programmed had not yet been triggered. It was scheduled for thirty-seven seconds later. The silver woman had pointed *before* the leak was active.

"You're trying to tell someone," Mira said to the empty room.

She put the goggles back on.

* * * * * * * * * *

The second run, Else spoke.

Not in words. The simulation had no voice capture. But Mira heard her inside her own mind, the way you hear a tune stuck in someone else's skull.

I threw the child. The fire came. But I felt the leak first. In the floor, a cold breath. I told no one. I was young. I thought it was the air conditioning. If I had spoken, if I had run to the control car...

The silver woman's face twisted. It was not anger. It was the arithmetic of grief, adding one life to another, forever failing to equal what was lost.

Mira did something no ghost story expects. She opened the simulation's source code. She found the hydrogen cell parameters. And she *reversed* the leak. She made Cell 4 whole. She wrote a new valve sequence that vented the leaking gas into the open air through a stern flap, harmless as a whale's breath. Then she reset the clock to 7:21 PM, May 6, 1937, ten minutes before the landing.

"I can't change the past," Mira said. "But I can change the simulation."

The silver woman stood in the digital corridor. The digital passengers laughed. Somewhere outside the digital windows, the real Lakehurst mooring mast waited in the real dusk, indifferent. Else Vogel raised her hand, not to wave farewell to a model or a movie, but to touch Mira's cheek. The silver was warm. It smelt faintly of linen and coffee.

You built a world where I could speak, Else said. *Now I have spoken. The child lived because of my arm. But the others, the ones I never warned, they died. You cannot save them. But you can remember them differently.*

She pointed now not at Cell 4, but at the ship itself. The whole length of it. *The rigid airship was not my grave. It was my choice. I chose to be here, in the sky, where the fire cannot reach me now, because you have made a sky without fire.*

Then she smiled. It was the

first smile of a ghost in seventy years.

And she began to fade, not as a light dims, but as a photograph develops in reverse, the silver retreating into the emulsion of things. The simulation continued. The *Hindenburg* descended, landed, the mooring lines dropped, the passengers stepped onto New Jersey soil, alive. A false history. A kinder one. Mira knew it was false. But she also knew that Else Vogel, for the first time since 1937, was no longer a witness to the flame. She was a passenger on a ship that never burned.

Mira saved the modified simulation. She did not share it. She kept it on a single hard drive, in a single folder, labelled *Else*.

She never saw the silver again. But sometimes, when she walked past a child's toy zeppelin hanging from a bedroom ceiling, she felt a faint warmth on her cheek, and the air smelt for just a second like coffee and linen. And she would wave back. ■

RICHARD STANFORD
The Informant
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His notebook was full of shorthand transcripts of phone conversations. It had been one of those 'nothing-is-ready-days', panic to deadline, reporters lost in traffic. But they had managed to put the late edition to bed.
The Informant
by Richard Stanford

The tuning

The lighthouse stood against the sea like a blackened tooth. When I first saw it, the bequest of a cousin whose name I had forgotten and whose existence I now regret; I felt only the damp revulsion one reserves for rotting wharves and the bellies of dead fish. But the instruments called me. The Fourier analysers, the spectral interferometers, the rack of photomultiplier tubes I had designed to catch the whisper of neutrinos. I am Thomas Thorne, and I do not believe in ghosts. I believe in residues.

The locals, those fish-eyed Yankees of Innsmouth stock, named the apparition the Drowned Mariner. Every twenty-seven years, they said, when Arcturus aligns with the drowned steeple of the Chapel of St. Elmo, a figure appears in the lantern room, a sailor in oilskins, throat laid open, one hand raised as though begging the tide to turn back. They avoided the promontory on that night. I, of course, marked it on my calendar.

“You’ll not stay the twenty-seventh, Professor,” said old Barnabas Hatch, who brought me salted cod and suspicious glances. His neck bore the crescent gill-slits of his kindred. “The Mariner don’t like witnesses.”

"The Mariner," I replied, adjusting the tripod of my field spectrograph, "is a standing wave in the local metric tensor, likely induced by a Paleozoic impact event. Witnessing is data."

Hatch sucked his teeth. "Data," he repeated, as though the word were a curse. "My great-uncle watched it. Stood right where you're standing. Next morning, his eyes were the colour of pitch, and he spoke in a language that made the dogs weep. They found him three days later trying to drink the tide."

I dismissed him. I was a fool of the highest order, the kind of fool who measures hell in angstroms.

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The night arrived with a sky like lead. Arcturus burned low and baleful through a rent in the clouds. At 11:47 pm, my magnetometer screamed, a deflection so violent I thought the needle would snap. Then the air began to *hum*. Not a sound, precisely. A pressure. A geometry that did not fit the three axes of my poor, mammalian skull.

The figure appeared in the lantern room. It was male, or male-shaped. Oilskins dripped phosphorescent green. The throat wound yawned black, and the hand rose, slow, pleading, eternal. I did not feel fear. I felt curiosity, which is fear's more dangerous cousin.

I climbed the spiral stairs, each step echoing like a gavel. The figure did not move. It was *fossilised*, I told myself. A holographic residue of a dying neuron in a dead god's brain. I raised my interferometer. Through the lens, the Mariner shattered.

Not a man. Never a man.

What I saw through the calibrated optics was a *fracture,* a wound in the present moment through which bled a spectrum my instruments named in colours that do not exist. Let me attempt the impossible: imagine a violet that tastes of salt and re-

grets. Imagine a green that hears you. The shape I had taken for a sailor was merely the shadow cast by a hyper-dimensional tear, my visual cortex forcing a human silhouette onto something that had no more relation to humanity than a scream has to a triangle.

And at the tear's edge, something watched.

Not the Mariner. The *colour*. A sentient chromatic signal, older than silicon, older than carbon, older than the weak force. It had been trapped between atoms since before Earth's crust cooled. The Mariner was its lure. Each witness, each pair of human eyes, completed a circuit. They did not see a ghost. They *observed* a waveform, and in observing, collapsed it one nanometer closer to our side.

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I heard a whisper. Not in the air. In my own phosphenes.

Seventeen circuits remain. Then the gate.

You have just completed the eighteenth.

I dropped the interferometer. The Mariner's hand twitched, the first motion I had seen in three hours. Its head turned. Its eyes were not eyes. They were wounds that looked at me through the mask of a drowned sailor, and behind the wounds, the *colour* smiled.

I ran. Down the spiral steps, my own breath a ragged metronome. Behind me, the hum crescendoed into a chord that bent the stone walls inward. The lighthouse groaned like a rib cage. When I burst onto the rocks, the tide had stopped. Not slowed. Stopped. The waves hung in mid-air, frozen, each droplet a lens that refracted the impossible violet-green.

Barnabas Hatch was gone. His boat was gone. In his place, on the wet sand, lay a single fish—except it was not a fish. It had my cousin's face. It had Hatch's gill-slits. It opened its mouth and spoke in the language that made dogs weep, *"Finish the cir-*

cuit, Thomas. Look again. Just once more. Then we can come all the way."

I did the only thing a sane man in a Lovecraft novel never does: I refused the curiosity. I ran to the fuel shed. I emptied every drum of kerosene. I climbed back to the lantern room, the Mariner now walking toward me ...yes, walking, its oilskins dripping not water but that sentient, hungering *colour*.

Its hand reached for my face.

I lit the match.

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The explosion turned the lighthouse into a torch. The blast threw me into the freezing sea. I swam until my arms were lead, until the shore was a rumour, until I collapsed on a beach of black sand that might have been France or might have been the inside of a dying star.

Behind me, the lighthouse burned. And as it burned, the Mariner screamed, not in agony, but in *frustration*. A sound like a cathedral collapsing into a piano. The circuit, I prayed, was broken.

But here is the horror, and the conclusion: In my pocket, still dry, still humming, was the interferometer's data card. I have not looked at it. I have buried it in a salt chest in a cellar I will never visit again. Yet last night, in the mirror, my own reflection blinked one eye a quarter-second after I did.

And behind my own face, just for a moment ...I saw the *colour*.

It is feeding on observation. And I have eighteen years left until the next alignment. I write this confession not as a warning, but as a plea, if you read these words, do not look for the Mariner. Do not complete the circuit. Do not think of the *colour*.

Because it can hear your thoughts.

And it is very, very hungry. ■

The reverse groove

The apartment held its breath after Eleanor died.

Not the shallow stillness of sleep, but the deep, chemical quiet of a vacuum-sealed jar. Arthur Pendelton, sound engineer for thirty-seven years, had calibrated his life to eliminate noise, hum from the refrigerator, bleed from the radiator, the faint 60-cycle drone of faulty wiring. He'd treated their one-bedroom on Vandam Street like a recording studio: bass traps in the corners, acoustic foam behind the art, the windows triple-glazed against the city's endless scream.

Eleanor used to laugh. "You'd seal *me* in epoxy if you could, Artie."

She was right. He loved her the way a safecracker loves a combination, precise, obsessive, terrified of error.

The accident happened on a Tuesday. Wet pavement. A taxi that didn't brake. The coroner used words like *subdural* and *non-survivable*, but Arthur heard only one frequency: silence. The kind that follows a cannon shot. The kind that rings.

For two months he sat in their chair, *her* chair, really, a cracked leather recliner they'd found on the street and listened to nothing. He stopped eating. Stopped sleeping. The apartment's ambient audio fell below 22 decibels, which is the sound of blood moving through your own inner ear.

Then he found the reel.

It was a Scotch 206, quarter-inch tape, spooled onto a plastic hub he'd last touched in 2019. They'd recorded a party. Laughter. Corks popping. Eleanor singing a mangled version of "La Vie en Rose," drunk and flat and glorious. He'd never digitised it because perfect memory was an enemy of the present tense.

He threaded the tape through his Studer A80, a machine he maintained like a heart-lung apparatus and hit play.

Forward, nothing. Just the warble of magnetised rust, voices smeared into a slurry of time.

But his fingers, trembling, had brushed the reverse lever.

The tape spun backward. The voices became whalesong. Words emerged from the wrong side of the waveform, like fossils pressed into stone.

And then: *"Arthur."*

His spine turned to ice water.

It was her. Not the forward Eleanor, the bright, solid, wine-stained Eleanor. This was Eleanor from inside a mirror. Eleanor as a negative. Her vowels stretched, her consonants softened at the edges, but the shape was unmistakable. The same breathy *r*. The same way she turned a question into a landing pad.

"El?" he whispered.

"Don't speak," the backward voice said. *"Just listen. I'm still here. I'm in the tape."*

He played it again. And again.

The next night, instructions began.

"Go to the basement. The third pipe from the left. Touch the rust spot."

He went. Three a.m. The basement smelled of burnt fuses and old rain. The pipe was cold, flaking orange corrosion. When he pressed his palm to it, he felt a vibration, not mechanical, but organic. Like a heartbeat trapped in the building's bones.

"*The super lied,*" the voice said when he returned to the tape. *"He turned off the basement light that night. He knew the taxi would be there."*

Arthur frowned. The super, Mr. Czerny, was a seventy-two-year-old Hungarian with a hernia and a limp. But the voice insisted. It fed him details, a receipt from a bar two blocks away, a phone call logged at 9:47 p.m., a parking ticket that proved the taxi had been idling for twenty-three minutes before impact.

Paranoid? Yes. But grief is paranoia's wet nurse.

He started a notebook. Dates. Times. Fingerprints lifted from the mailbox. He followed the voice's instructions with the same meticulous discipline he once applied to equalizing a kick drum. *Go to the corner of Houston and Mulberry. Look at the drain grate. Whom do you see?*

He saw Czerny's nephew, a thick-necked man with a shaved head, smoking a cigarette.

"He pushed her," the voice whispered. *"He wanted her apartment. He wanted her life."*

Arthur bought a knife. A small one. German steel, folding blade. He sat in Eleanor's chair and held it while the tape looped in reverse, the ghostly voice now urgent, almost hungry.

"Tonight. Midnight. The basement boiler room. He'll be there alone."

He stood. The knife fit his palm like a tuning fork.

But as he reached the bedroom door, something caught his ear, a splinter of forward-play sound bleeding through the reverse. A cough. A chuckle. A man's voice, low and amused, buried beneath Eleanor's backward whispers.

Arthur stopped.

He rewound the tape to the party recording, the forward version and isolated the waveform. There, at the 47-minute mark, during a lull between songs, Eleanor had said *"Did you hear that? The floor upstairs. Sounded like someone dragging a chair."*

And then, quieter: *"Probably just the old tenant. The one who ...well, anyway."*

Arthur's hands went cold.

He reversed the tape again. Slowed the speed. Ran it through a spectral filter he'd designed for removing room tone. The voice emerged from the magnetic domain like a body surfacing from a lake.

But it wasn't Eleanor.

The timbre was older. Male. The accent had a warble of early-20th-century New York—the flattened *a* of a Lower East Side tenement. The words were the same *"Go to the basement"* but the *source* was different. The voice had simply *worn* Eleanor's frequencies like a stolen coat.

Arthur's engineering mind did what it always did: it analysed. The phantom voice wasn't recorded in 2019. It was recorded much, much earlier. Decades

earlier. On the same tape, yes but on a deeper layer, below the magnetic floor, a ghost in the medium. A former tenant, a man named Viktor Pasko, who'd died in this very apartment in 1958. The landlord's records, which Arthur had never bothered to read, noted the cause as *"accidental self-strangulation"*a medical absurdity.

Pasko had been an audio hobbyist, too. He'd recorded his own voice, over and over, trying to preserve something he was losing. His mind, perhaps. Or his soul. And when he died, his voice didn't leave. It just sank into the oxide layer, waiting for another lonely man with a reel-to-reel and a broken heart.

Arthur watched the tape spin.

The voice, Pasko's voice, continued its backward sermon: *"The knife, Arthur. The boiler room. He's waiting."*

But now Arthur heard the lie beneath the words. The same spiralling logic he'd seen in obsessive clients who believed record labels were planting subliminal messages in pink noise. The voice didn't want justice. It wanted re-enactment.

In 1958, Viktor Pasko had also followed instructions from a voice on a tape. A voice that sounded like his dead wife. He'd gone to the basement boiler room. He'd killed the super, a different super, a man long dead, with a German folding knife. Then, in the confusion, Pasko had turned the blade on himself. A murder-suicide loop, recorded live onto quarter-inch magnetic tape as the police broke down the door.

And now the tape was offering Arthur the same choreography. The same knife. The same victim's name, replaced like a worn-out actor.

Arthur did something the voice did not expect.

He lifted the knife, walked to the basement, and opened the boiler room door.

Mr. Czerny was not inside.

The room was empty except for the furnace, a water heater, and a small oak table. On the table sat a reel-to-reel machine, an old Ampex 350, identical to the one Viktor Pasko had used in 1958. The tape was already threaded. The counter read 00:00.

Arthur sat down.

He pressed RECORD.

"My name is Arthur Pendelton," he said, speaking clearly into the microphone. "If you're listening to this in the future, and you've lost someone, and you hear their voice on a backward tape ...*stop*. It's not them. It's the house. It's the groove. Don't follow it."

He paused. The furnace hummed. The water heater clicked.

Then he picked up the knife, walked out of the boiler room, locked the door behind him, and threw the key into the rubbish chute.

Upstairs, he erased the Scotch 206 with a bulk degausser. The white noise lasted twelve seconds. When it faded, the tape was blank. No party. No Eleanor. No Pasko.

He sat in her chair. The apartment's ambient noise rose to 31 decibels—the sound of a refrigerator, a radiator, and one man breathing alone.

He stayed there for three days.

On the fourth morning, he heard a faint rustle from the bedroom closet. A cardboard box he'd missed. Inside: a single compact cassette, no label, recorded at 1⅞ IPS.

He did not play it.

He carried the cassette to the window, held it up to the grey city light, and saw the faint imprint of oxide patterns through the translucent shell. Somewhere in that magnetic labyrinth, a voice was waiting. Perhaps Eleanor's. Perhaps Pasko's. Perhaps his own, recorded in a future he had not yet lived.

Arthur opened the window. The air smelled of rain and taxi exhaust.

He dropped the cassette into the alley below.

It shattered on the cobblestones, plastic, tape, and all the ghosts inside.

For one perfect, silent second, the world was clean.

Then the wind picked up, and Arthur heard, just at the edge of hearing, a backward whisper.

Not from the alley. From the walls.

The apartment was still listening.

And it had all the time in the world. ■

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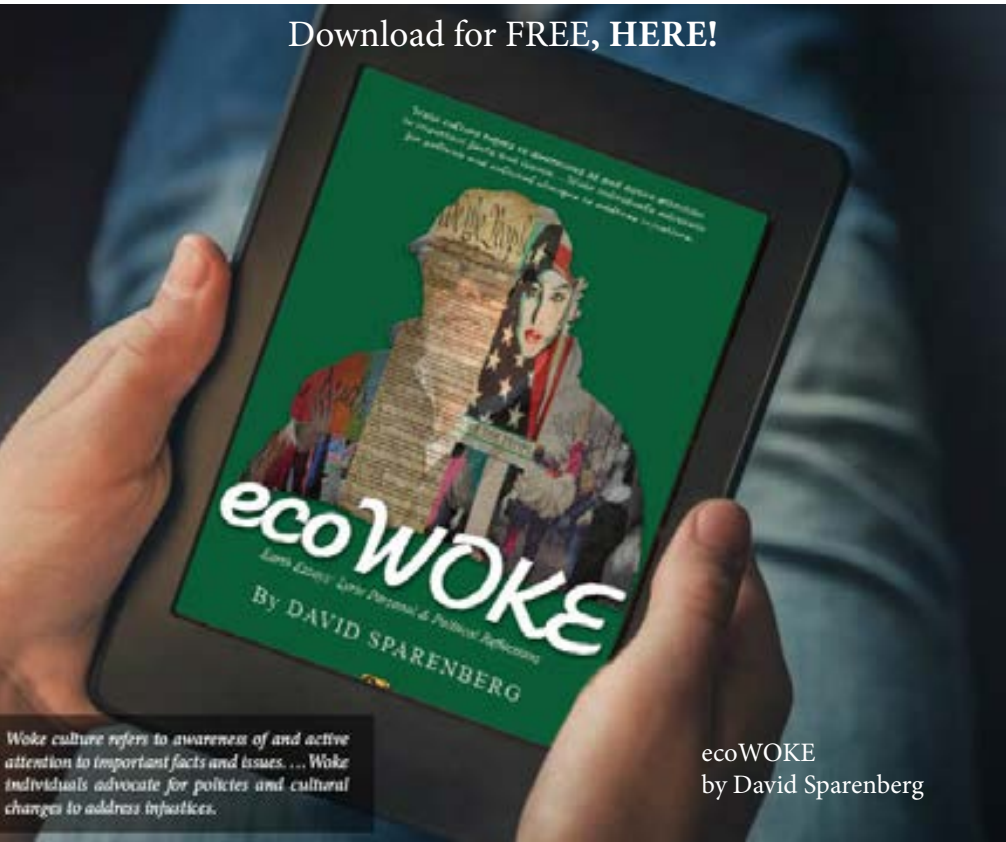
ecoWOKE
By DAVID SPARENBERG
Woke culture refers to awareness of and active attention to important facts and issues. ... Woke individuals advocate for policies and cultural changes to address injustices.

ecoWOKE
by David Sparenberg

The schist scream

I have struck pick and pen into many a stubborn stratum, both of earth and of forbidden learning, but never have I confronted a substance so utterly wrong as that which oozed from the breach at Piltdown Inlet. The abandoned whaling town lay salt-crusted and forgotten, its tryworks long cold beneath a sky the colour of dead mackerel. I, Professor Alistair Horkey, Chair of Experimental Petrology at Miskatonic University, had dismissed the local legends as the rheumatic fancies of inbred lobstermen. Their whispers of "the singing silt" and "the tide that walks" were mere folklore, until my diamond core drill bit into the schist at three hundred and twelve metres.

The shore of the inlet was a desolate stretch of grey shingle, littered with the skeletal remains of long-dead dories and rotting timber that smelled of brine and decay. The tryworks stood as a brooding monolith, its iron vats rusting beneath a heavy, damp fog that clung to the coastline like a shroud. I had brought three assistants and a team of roughnecks from Arkham, though they had all abandoned the camp by the end of the first fortnight, driven away by the incessant, low-frequency hum that seemed to emanate from the very bedrock. I was left alone with my instruments, a man pos-

sessed by the singular ambition of mapping the deep earth.

When the drill finally pierced the strata, the resistance vanished instantly, and the engine coughed, sputtering a dark, viscous substance onto the wooden platform of the rig. The clay that extruded from the borehole was not natural. It pulsed with a slow, omnidirectional pressure, like the peristalsis of a cosmic intestine. Its colour I can only describe as *ichthyian violet,* the shade of a bruise on a drowned thing.

And it *shrieked*.

Not audibly, but directly into the calcium of my teeth, the marrow of my femurs. A single, fossilised command, compressed through three hundred million years of phosphatised sediment: *Finish.*

I did not understand then. I thought I had released a ghost, some whaler's woe, some cabin boy's regret. How quaint. How anthropically stupid. I collected a sample in a glass specimen jar, watching as the violet mass

seemed to press against the glass, leaving a greasy, iridescent film that refused to wash away with ether or alcohol.

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The first to change was Ezra Maelstrom, the harbourmaster, a man so taciturn I had presumed him aphasic. I found him standing by the water's edge at midnight, the brackish water lapping his knee-high boots. He did not turn as I approached with my lantern, his gaze fixed on the submerged summit of a drowned seamount just beyond the breakers.

Then, I watched in horror as he began to *unfold*. His skin did not rupture; it *retextured* into a leathery, flinty hide, the colour of wet slate. His eyes sank inward, disappearing into the dark sockets, only to re-emerge as translucent polyps on stalks, each one swivelling independently. His blood, when I later pricked him with a sampling needle, had become a black, low-viscosity mud that vibrated at seventeen hertz, the resonant frequency of human terror. That infra-sound hummed through Piltdown's few remaining weatherboard houses all that week, curdling milk and loosening fillings.

"Dr. Horkey," he said, his first words to me in three years. His voice had become the scrape of a glacier over slate. "The cathedral requires more hands. More spines. You will instruct the others to submit."

He was not angry. He was not malevolent. He was *geological*. A tectonic process wearing Ezra's face as a temporary tool to quarry the necessary architecture.

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"We are not building a city," the voice whispered through the floorboards. "We are carving one, downward."

I locked myself in the assay lab, barricading the door with heavy, lead-lined core boxes. Through the grimy, salt-encrusted window, I watched the metamorphosis spread like a contagion of stone and cartilage.

Ruth Pargeter, the postmistress, began weeping from her knuckles, tears of a viscous, salt-heavy bitumen that hardened into gleaming tourmaline crystals upon touching the pine floor.

Old Silas Hooper, who had not walked since his schooner capsized in ’84, stood up from his wicker chair, rotated his pelvis one hundred and eighty degrees, and used his own ossified spine as a fulcrum to lever headstones from the Baptist cemetery. They were moving in a strange, unhurried rhythm, their joints clicking and grinding as if they were made of dry gravel.

The schist scream had no memory of the Star-Spawn that once uttered it. That entity had died before the first amphibian dragged itself onto a Carboniferous beach. All that remained was the *ontic residue* of its final, thwarted metamorphosis: a larval urge to complete a form that would never again know consciousness. And the nearest available biomass, the soft, warm, upright apes of Piltdown Inlet, would serve as the osteoblasts of a subterranean ossuary.

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By the second night, the possessed had excavated a pit the size of a church nave, directly beneath the old tryworks. They worked without tools, using their own transformed bodies: fingers fused into flint augers, ribs flared into shovels, tongues elongated into slick, basalt-tasting probes that tasted the stone for the correct fracture lines. The infra-sound became a dirge, a rhythmic thrumming that made my floating ribs ache. I stuffed my ears with candle wax and drank the lamp oil to steady my nerves, but the sound bypassed my ears entirely, vibrating the water in my tin cup and the very blood in my veins.

It was then I understood the only possible countermeasure. The command was fossilised in the clay seam, a phonograph record of agony etched into illite and chlorite. To stop the process, I had not to expel a ghost but to *erase a stratum*.

I gathered the last three sticks of dynamite from Ezra's shack, descended the borehole shaft with shaking hands, and placed the charge at the precise depth where the violet clay first appeared. The air down there was cold and tasted of ozone and deep-sea sediment, pressing against my temples with a weight I could feel in my skull.

As I primed the fuse, a hand of flint closed around my ankle. Ezra or what wore Ezra, bent its polyps down to mine. The infra-sound vibrated my very mitochondria.

"You are a geologist," it said, the vocal cords rasping against stone. "You know that stone does not die. It only repackages. You will blast nothing. You will *join*."

I did not answer. I struck the match and lit the fuse.

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The explosion was not a deafening roar. It was a *cough,* the planet clearing its throat of a three-hundred-million-year-old hairball. The violet clay sublimated into a fine, non-singing dust that coated my clothes and skin. Ezra's flint hand crumbled to ordinary sand. The polyps collapsed into ordinary, bloodshot jelly. The pit beneath the tryworks began to collapse, filling with brackish water and regret.

By dawn, the metamorphosis had reversed. The townspeople woke naked, confused, covered in a grey silt that tested as ordinary Quaternary loess. Their bones ached but were bone again. Their eyes watered but saw only the grey Atlantic. The infra-sound ceased.

I told them a landslide had triggered a pocket of methane. They believed me because they needed to. I filed no paper with Miskatonic. I struck the Piltdown Inlet from all my maps.

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But here is the horror that follows me into every lecture hall, every thin-bedded sedimenta-

ry outcrop, every quiet night of bourbon and insomnia: the schist scream was *not destroyed*. It was merely *scattered*.

That final command... *Finish...* now resides as a dormant crystal defect in every shard of the violet clay that my blast aerosolised. And I breathed it in.

- **Symptoms of the infection:**

  - **Skin:** My cheekbones are flexing into something *flintier* and harder when I wash my face.

  - **Bodily fluids:** My phlegm has grown dark and sings at a frequency only dogs hear.

  - **Involuntary actions:** Last week, I caught my right hand trying to draw a cathedral floor plan on a napkin—not in ink, but in a thin, black, slow-moving silt that wept from my own cuticle.

I am not haunted. Haunting is for the dead. I am *hosting* a geological process that has mistaken my flesh for a convenient schist. And I fear, dear reader, that my metamorphosis will not wait for the next drilling expedition.

It finishes tonight.

I have left this account in the care of the Miskatonic library's restricted stacks. If you hear a low hum from the cabinet where this manuscript rests, do not open it. Do not breathe near it. And for the love of all that is igneous, sedimentary, and safely metamorphosed, do not *finish* what I started. ■

The weight of stillness

The cellar stairs remember everything. They remember the night, twenty-three years ago, though he has stopped counting, when Edward Trow brought her down in two trips. First the body, wrapped in the quilt his grandmother knitted for their wedding. Then the shovel, which he left leaning against the coal bin for eleven years before he could bear to touch it again.

He gives haircuts now in the front room of the cottage on Church Lane, where the sign says *TROW & SON* in gold leaf that has mostly flaked away. There never was a son. Only Margaret, who wanted one, and who bled on the bathroom floor one Tuesday in July while the village fete raised money for the church roof. She bled for six hours. Edward held her hand for five of them, and then he went down to the cellar because he did not know what else to do with a woman who had stopped breathing in a puddle of her own disappointment.

After that, he became the best barber in Northamptonshire. Quiet. Steady hands. Never a word out of place. When old Mrs. Hatch mentioned that she hadn't seen Margaret in a while, Edward said, "She left me for a man in Derby," and some-

thing in his voice made sure no one ever asked again.

The cellar stairs remember. And so, every night, does Edward.

The sleepwalking started in the third month. He would wake on the cellar floor, shears cold in his hand, standing over the dressmaker's dummy he had dressed in Margaret's blue floral housecoat. The dummy's plaster head had no face, just a smooth white oval but Edward had learned to cut its hair anyway. Long strokes, careful around the ears. Margaret had worn a bob. He gave the dummy a bob every night, trimming the same inch of air, and in the morning he would find strands of grey hair on the cellar floor.

His own hair. Falling out in clumps from the stress, he told the doctor. He did not mention the shears.

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The stranger came on a Tuesday.

Edward had just finished with Mr. Pargeter, the butcher, whose neck smelt of bacon fat and whose parting words were always the same: "Keep your chin up, Ted." Edward nodded, swept the floor, and looked up.

The man in the chair had not been in the shop a moment ago.

He was thin in the way that old photographs are thin, not an absence of flesh but an absence of weight, as if gravity had only half-claimed him. He wore a grey suit, collar undone, no tie. His hair was the colour of wet ash. His face was ordinary. Forgetful. The kind of face that could sit across from you on a train for three hours and leave no trace in your memory except a vague sense of having been watched.

"Shave," the man said. His voice was flat. Not cold. Just flat, like a mirror that has stopped reflecting because there is nothing left worth seeing.

Edward felt something move in his chest. He told himself it

was indigestion. He told himself the light through the window was playing tricks. He told himself the man had walked in while Edward's back was turned, and that the lack of a bell on the door was simply because Edward had taken the bell down last week when the clapper stuck.

He spread the hot towel anyway. His hands did not shake. They never shook anymore, not since the third year, when he had trained himself to hold the shears in his sleep.

The lather was warm. The razor was a straight-edge, honed on a leather strop his father had used in 1947. Edward lifted it.

And then he saw the mirror.

The barber's mirror is an old thing, silver-backed, bolted to the wall above the customer's chair. In it, Edward should have seen the stranger's face. He should have seen his own hands, the razor, the shelf of tonics behind the stranger's head.

He saw only himself. Alone. Razor raised to no one.

The stranger's head was turned slightly. Not towards Edward. Towards the mirror. His lips twitched. Not a smile. A confirmation.

Edward looked down. The floor was clean linoleum, swept twice a day for twenty-three years. The stranger's shoes, brown leather, scuffed at the toes, were planted flat. But the shadow rising from them was not the shadow of a thin man in a grey suit.

It was the shadow of a woman. Short. Rounded shoulders. The shape of a bob cut into the silhouette's edge.

Edward's hand made a small sound. The razor clicked against the porcelain lather bowl.

"You're not real," he said.

The stranger said nothing. The shadow on the floor turned its head, not the stranger's head, *its* head and looked up at Edward. Even without features, it was unmistakably Margaret. Margaret on the cellar stairs. Margaret in the blue housecoat. Margaret with her hand pressed to her belly where the life had slipped out of her like wine from a broken glass.

"I can't shave you," Edward whispered. "You have to go."

The stranger stood. Not slowly. He simply became vertical, like a plank being righted. He walked to the door without paying. The shadow did not follow him. It stayed on the floor for three full seconds after the door closed, a stain of woman-shaped dark, and then it pulled itself towards the door as if being reeled in on a string.

Edward stood in the empty shop until the sunlight moved across his shoes and told him that an hour had passed.

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The second visit was a week later.

Edward had not slept. The shears had found his scalp again, and he had woken in the cellar with a bald patch the size of a saucer and the dummy wearing Margaret's blue housecoat and a new haircut cut into its plaster skull. He had scrubbed the cellar floor until his knuckles bled. He had prayed to a God he stopped believing in on the Tuesday in July. Nothing helped.

The stranger came at noon. This time he sat without being invited. This time Edward did not offer a towel.

"I'm closed," Edward said.

The stranger looked at him. The ordinary face was less ordinary now. Edward could see the architecture of it, the bones too sharp, the eyes too still. Like a portrait painted over another portrait, trying not to show what was underneath.

"You buried her wrong," the stranger said.

Edward's heart made a sound like a fist hitting a wall. "I don't know what you mean."

"You buried her in anger." The stranger tilted his head. The gesture was not his. It was too quick, too birdlike. Margaret had tilted her head that way when she was disappointed. "Not in grief. In anger at the mess she made. You loved her, yes. But you loved her like you love a good pair of scissors, for what they can do. When she broke, you threw her in the dark."

Edward's hands were shaking now. They had not shaken in twenty years. "Get out."

The stranger stood. Edward watched the floor. The shadow this time was not on the floor.

It was on the wall.

Margaret's silhouette, crisp and perfect, climbing towards the ceiling like smoke in reverse. It moved up the plaster, past the shelf of tonics, past the certificate from Barber School 1961. It reached the corner where wall met ceiling and did not stop. It crossed the ceiling, upside

down, the bob hanging towards the floor, and stopped directly above Edward's head.

He felt cold. Not the cold of winter. The cold of a cellar floor at three in the morning.

The stranger walked out. The shadow stayed on the ceiling for an hour. Edward watched it until it faded with the light, and then he went down to the cellar and sat on the stairs with his head in his hands and did not cry. He had forgotten how.

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The third visit was the last.

Edward knew it the moment he woke. He had not sleepwalked the night before. The dummy was still in the corner, still wearing the blue housecoat, but its plaster head had been turned towards the cellar stairs. And on its smooth white face, scratched into the plaster with something sharp, were two eyes and a mouth.

The mouth was smiling.

He went upstairs. He made tea. He did not drink it. He opened the shop at eight o'clock, and at eight-oh-three, the stranger walked through the door without opening it.

The shadow came first. It detached from the stranger's feet and walked ahead of him, Margaret-shaped, bob swinging. It slid across the floor and climbed the barber's chair and sat in it. Waiting.

The stranger stood behind the chair. He put his hands on its back. His reflection did not appear in the mirror.

"Finish what you started," the stranger said.

Edward picked up the razor. His hand was steady now. Not because he was calm. Because there was nothing left in him that could shake.

He looked at the shadow in the chair. Margaret. His wife. The woman he had carried down the cellar stairs in a blood-soaked quilt. The woman

whose face he had not looked at for twenty-three years because he had buried her with the quilt pulled over her head.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The shadow did not move.

Edward lifted the razor to his own throat. The stranger did not stop him. The shadow watched.

He shaved himself. Slowly. Carefully. The blade scraped the stubble from his jaw, his cheeks, his upper lip. He did it in the mirror, watching his own face grow smooth and pink and raw. And as the last patch of hair fell away, he saw something change in the glass.

His reflection was still there. But his shadow was gone.

Not missing. *Moving*.

He looked down. His shadow, his own shadow, tall and thin and balding, was peeling off the floor like a decal lifted by a thumbnail. It curled at the edges. It rose. And from underneath it, the shadow that had been Margaret's rose with it, tangled together, twisting like two people embracing in a dark room.

They separated.

Margaret's shadow walked towards the door. It did not look back.

Edward's shadow stood where it was for a moment. Then it walked towards the barber's chair. It climbed into the seat. It put its head back as if waiting for a towel.

Edward looked at the mirror. His reflection smiled at him but his reflection had no shadow now. His reflection was pale and smooth and featureless, like a dressmaker's dummy.

Like the thing in the cellar.

The stranger was gone. The shop was empty. Edward stood in the middle of the floor, holding the razor, and he understood.

He had been cutting the wrong head all these years.

He walked to the cellar stairs. He did not turn on the light. He sat down in the dark, and he felt the weight of twenty-three years settle on his shoulders like a housecoat made of stone. Somewhere above him, the front door opened and closed.

The shadow with his face walked out into the village.

It was a quiet day. The sun was warm. The church bells were ringing for morning prayer. No one noticed that the barber's shop was dark. No one noticed that Edward Trow sat alone in the cellar, staring at a plaster head with two eyes and a mouth scratched into its face.

No one noticed because Edward Trow had always been so quiet. So steady. So good with his hands.

The shadow with his face walked past the church, past the pub, past the Hatch house where old Mrs. Hatch was hanging laundry. It did not speak. It did not need to. It had been silent for twenty-three years.

It could be silent a little longer.

And in the cellar, Edward finally remembered how to cry. It sounded like a razor being stropped. Slow. Back and forth. A sound that could go on forever.

The cellar stairs did not forget. But they no longer remembered him.

He was not heavy enough to leave a mark. ■

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